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A
L E T T E R
T O T H E
REV^D. SAMUEL CHANDLER, D.D.
CONCERNING THE
CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE
O F
FUTURE PUNISHMENT.

BY SAMUEL BOURN.

Shall not the Judge of the whole Earth do Right?

GENESIS xviii. 25.

Illa suspicio intolerabili dolore cruciat, si opinamur eos, quibus orbatu sumus, esse cum aliquo sensu iis in malis, quibus vulgo opinantur. Hanc excutere opinionem mihi met volui radicitus.

CIC. Tusc. Qu. Lib. i.

M. *Hæc fortasse metuis, & idcirco mortem censes esse sempiternum malum.* A. *Adeone me delirare censes, ut ita esse credam?* M. *Antu hæc non credis?* A. *Minime verò.* M. *Male hercule narras.* A. *Cur, quæso?* M. *Quia disertus esse possem, si contra ista dicerem.* A. *Quis enim non in ejusmodi causa? aut quid negotii est, hæc poetarum & pictorum portenta convincere?* M. *Atqui pleni sunt libri Philosophorum contra ista ipsa differentium.* A. *Ineptè sanè: quis est enim tam excors, quem ista moveant?*

Ibid.

L O N D O N :

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MDCCCLIX.

LETTER

REV. SAMUEL JOHNSON

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

FURTHER EXPLANATION

BY SAMUEL JOHNSON

OF THE

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

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Abilities, and Study of the Christian Re-

I am more ready to grant my own Cu-
riosity in making this public Request,
as I am persuaded, that there is nothing
more conducive to the Discovery of Truth,
than it is to state what is the subject,
yet are of contrary Opinions, enter into a
moral Dispute of each other. Argu-
ments, and with an amicable spirit of free
industry, examine the grounds of what may
be the true and right.

LETTER
TO THE
Rev^d. SAMUEL CHANDLER, D. D.

REVEREND SIR,

Norwich, Sept. 24, 1759.

HAVING heard you publicly assert
some Time ago, "That the Doctrine
of *Annihilation*, or, that the Souls
of wicked Men shall be totally destroyed in
the future State," is utterly inconsistent with
the Christian Scheme; and as you did not
at that Time produce any Argument of
Reason, or Authority of Scripture, to prove
what you had asserted; it raised in me a
Curiosity to know by what Proof you are
able to support your Assertion; in Hope of
receiving such Satisfaction, as may be ex-
pected from a Gentleman of your known

Abilities, and Study of the Christian Revelation.

I am more ready to gratify my own Curiosity in making you this public Request, as I am persuaded, that there is nothing more conducive to the Discovery of Truth, than if those who studied the same Subject, yet are of contrary Opinions, enter into a mutual Disquisition of each others Arguments, and, with an amicable Spirit of free Inquiry, examine the Strength of what may be alledged on both Sides.

That I am of an Opinion directly opposite to yours, you need not to be informed: Nor do I see the least Reason to avoid either a public Declaration, or Defence, of my Opinion. For, as long as I remain fully convinced, as I am at present, That that Doctrine which you asserted, more than once, to be absolutely inconsistent with the Christian Scheme, is the *very Doctrine of Christianity*; it will not affect me in the least, whether the Opinion which I maintain, be thought old, or new, common, or singular, popular, or unpopular.

That Men who apply their Minds to the Study of Religion and the Holy Scriptures, should

should be of different and even contrary Opinions, is certainly no new Thing in the Christian World. But that such should conspire, by a joint Examination and friendly Controversy, to investigate Truth for themselves and others, in a Subject concerning which they totally differ; is (I am sorry to say) something new and uncommon. But as the Author of the Epistle to the *Hebrews* exhorts them *To provoke one another* (as our Translators have rendered it) *to Love and good Works*; so I do not doubt, but you, as well as every other Reader of this Pamphlet, will approve my Conduct, in inviting and urging you in this public Manner, to a friendly Discussion of so important a Subject, as this before us.

The Importance of it will, I apprehend, be readily allowed; especially, by those who have a real Concern for the Credit of the Christian Religion. At least, it appears of so much Consequence to me, That if it should be proved, that the final Punishment threatened to wicked Men in the New Testament, is not a total Destruction, but an endless Preservation in a State of Misery and Torment; this would, in my Opinion, fix a greater Odium upon Christianity, and raise a stronger Objection to it, than all its Adversaries

Adversaries have yet been able to produce: And, I will venture to assert, that there are many Persons in this Nation, of no inconsiderable Understanding, who would be strongly disposed to reject the New Testament as a Divine Revelation, if they were convinced that it contains such a Doctrine.

For, that any Doctrine should be true, and have the real Stamp of Divine Authority, which ascribes to the supreme Governor of the Universe, a Conduct unworthy of any Prince, or Governor on Earth, and repugnant to our best Conceptions of the Measures and Ends of good Government; cannot easily be admitted by Persons of a thoughtful and ingenuous Mind. To overcome the Antipathy of a good Heart, and the Remonstrance of a reasoning Mind against it, will require an immense Weight of external Evidence.

A Limitation of Punishments is essential to all good Government: To extend them beyond the Limits of Reason, or of Law, which is the public Reason, is one Characteristic of Tyranny. Where Punishments are extended, or increased, so far as the public Safety and Welfare require, and no further; *i. e.* where they are always limited and directed by a View to the Happiness

piness of the Whole; there is good Government: But where they are increased, either in Degree, or Duration, beyond what is requisite to that End; there is Tyranny: Where they are unlimited, or infinite; there is the greatest Tyranny: For to punish a Criminal in an excessive Degree, and beyond what the Ends of good Government require, is as real Injustice and Cruelty, as to inflict a lesser Degree of Punishment upon an innocent Person. For in both Cases, it is equally inflicting Misery, not to answer any necessary, or useful End, but for the mere sake of increasing Misery; which is the *worst End* that can be conceived.

There neither is, nor can be, any other Difference, between the best and the worst Government possible; than that the former is administered with a View to produce and maintain the greatest Virtue and Happiness, and to prevent, or extinguish, as much as possible, Wickedness and Misery; and the latter with a View to prolong and encrease Wickedness and Misery. Now, whether the *endless* Preservation of wicked Spirits, in order to inflict upon them *infinite* Miseries, be more consistent with the *former*, or the *latter* Kind of Government; is not difficult to be determined. Their Wickedness, or their Misery, may be a Reason in the Mind
of

of a good Governor, for destroying them: But the contrary, viz. preserving them for ever in a State of Wickedness and Misery, appears more conducive to the Ends of the *worst* Government, than of the *best*.

To alledge, That human Ignorance is so great, and our Ideas of what is fittest and best so imperfect, that we can form no Judgment of what the Ends of Divine Government may require; and that therefore, for ought we know, *infinite* Punishment, and the *endless* Existence of some Beings in the *greatest* Misery, may be made subservient, by the incomprehensible Wisdom of Providence, to the greatest Virtue and Happiness of the Universe;—is only arguing from a *supposed Possibility* against the greatest *Probability*; and endeavouring, under Color of human Ignorance, to screen a Doctrine apparently most injurious to the Character of the Supreme Being.

In human Governments, extreme and lingering Punishments are a certain Mark of Barbarity, and a Criterion by which to distinguish a *Tyrant* from a *just and good Prince*. In the best constituted Governments, Punishments are the mildest, in the worst, the severest. For a perfect *Tyranny*,

is supported solely by *Fear*; but a just and legal Government, by *better* Principles and Affections. And whether, the *best*, or the *worst* Governments on Earth, are most *like* the *Divine*; whether the greatest *Tyrants*, or the most beneficent and *merciful* *Princes*, most *resemble* the perfect *Governor of the Universe*; no one will hesitate in deciding.

But, indeed, in all human Governments, even the worst, *Death* (which is *Annihilation* in respect to human Society) is the ultimate Punishment: And all that is added, by those Judges who proceed to the extreme Rigor, is an Augmentation, for a short Space of Time, of the Horrors and Agonies preceding, or attending the Execution. And it is hardly to be conceived, that any Prince, though absolute in Power, tyrannical in Disposition, and both injured and incensed to the highest Degree, would not, in length of Time, think Justice satisfied, if not feel his own Resentment satiated, by the extreme and lasting Miseries of the Criminal: And the Idea of making these Miseries everlasting, was this in his Power, would be found too abhorrent to Reason and Humanity, to be long entertained in a human Breast.

How then can we think of imputing a Procedure, exceeding the Severity of the greatest Tyrant, and of the worst of Governments on Earth, to that Being, whom we stile the best; *whose tender Mercies are over all his Works*; whom we ought to Love with all our Hearts, and to contemplate with the greatest Delight; and in whose Designs and Measures we ought to place an entire Confidence? Why do we stile him *most merciful*? Why address him as THE FATHER OF MANKIND? — A *Father*, indeed, may punish a wicked and disobedient Son: *i. e.* May withdraw his Favour from him, may disinherit him, may inflict Stripes, or other Penalties upon him; nay, acting as Magistrate and Judge, may put him to Death. But what should we think of that *Father*, who acting in the Capacity of a Judge over his offending Offspring, would not be satisfied (be their Crimes ever so great) either with their total Destruction, or their suffering for any limited Duration, or the Addition of the former to the latter; but who would rather judge them to *live for ever*, than to *perish for ever in Fire unquenchable*? — How could such a Judgment consist either with the Equity of Government, or the Clemency

Clemency of a Judge? How much less with the Disposition of a *Parent*? — How vain is it to compliment the Almighty with the Titles of *most Just* and *most Merciful*; if at the same Time we ascribe to him a Conduct, not only inconsistent with the *Paternal* Character, but irreconcilable to our clearest Notions of *Justice* as well as *Mercy*?

Nothing is of greater importance to Religion, than to preserve the Character of the Supreme Being inviolate: For without this Foundation it cannot be supported; but will be apt to degenerate into slavish Superstition, or a blind and savage Enthusiasm. Yet, perhaps, no Character in the World has been more mistaken, or traduced, and, consequently, suffered more Reproach and Injury from the Tongues and Pens of Men; Whilst not understanding the Nature and End of Government in general; nor having formed any clear and consistent Notions of Justice and Mercy, or of that public Utility, which ought always to be intended and answered, by punishing as well as by rewarding; they have erected, in their own Imagination, a Scheme of Government, according to their own narrow, partial, arbitrary, or enthusiastic Conceits; and have

fondly imputed this Scheme, to the most sublime and excellent Being, whose Wisdom and Goodness are infinite, whose Thoughts and Designs excel those of the wisest and best Men, *as the Heavens are above the Earth.*

Nothing then can be more becoming those, who are appointed to be Ministers of Religion, and Guardians of its Truth and Purity, than to vindicate God's Government of the World, and to rescue that most sublime and sacred Character, which we shou'd always contemplate with the highest Veneration and Affection, from those unworthy Notions, which Men are apt to intermix with their Belief of a Deity; and especially, from those black Calumnies, by which he is represented as no better, in effect, than the greatest Tyrant, instead of being the most just, beneficent and merciful Governor. For the Influence which Religion has upon the Dispositions and Morals of Mankind, will be useful, or hurtful, in proportion as their Sentiments of the Divine Nature and Government are Good, or Evil. The worst Evils of Superstition and Enthusiasm have their Source in an unjust, or partial Opinion of the Deity. Nor can the Belief of his Existence, or Almighty

mighty Power, produce any good Effects, separate from a Belief of his perfect Justice and Goodness. A just Esteem of the Deity, therefore, is that Spring of true Religion and Virtue, which ought to be preserved, as much as possible, pure and untainted in the Minds of Men.

It is more curious and difficult than necessary, to account for the Propensity of Mankind, to receive and retain such ill Impressions of the Deity, and his Government of the World. Whether they may be ascribed to those Fears and Horrors, which are apt sometimes, especially in some Persons, to seize and wholly possess the Imagination, and thereby disturb and over-power their Reason:— Or, to their violent Resentments against those who offend and injure them, which tempt them to avenge themselves in proportion to their own Power, rather than to do Justice in proportion to the Offence; and hence lead them to imagine, that the greater Power the Person offended is possessed of, the greater Punishment he will consequently inflict:— Or, whether they may be owing in some Instances to the Strength of any other Passions;— so much is certain, That human Passions and Affections, either separate or united, have a great Influence

Influence upon their Understandings, and contribute both to form and confirm their particular Sentiments of the Character and Disposition of the Supreme Being.

It may be equally difficult to trace out with any Precision, how such Opinions have actually arisen and spread in the World; particularly this barbarous Notion of a State of never-ending Misery and Torment. The Heathen Poets adopted the vulgar Fables, in regard to the different Species of the Infernal Torments. And *Virgil* assigns a perpetual Duration of Misery to some Criminals; — “*Sedet æternumque sedebit Infelix Theseus* :” — though to others he is so favourable as to allow, in process of Time, a Release: So that his Doctrine has a remarkable Conformity to the Popish Hell and Purgatory. — But it was the Business of the Poets to affect the Imagination: And to this End, they made the like Use of the fabulous Traditions of their Times, as *Shakespeare* does of his Witches and Apparitions. — These were the *Poetarum & Pictorum Portenta*, which *Cicero*, as a Philosopher, speaks of with so much Contempt, as to say, “Who can be so senseless as to give any Credit to them?”

Mahomet seems to adopt the Doctrine of eternal Torments in good Earnest; and thunders it out, not only against Criminals, but against all who do not receive his *Koran*. His Language is, " They shall undergo the Rigours of an infinite Pain.— They shall never be eased in their Torments.— They shall be eternally confined in the Fire of Hell. — They shall dwell there eternally.— God will change their burned Skin into a new Skin, that they may suffer the more.— He hath prepared Hell for them, where they shall remain eternally. — The Infidels shall be encompassed with Flames of Hell. — They shall have Shirts of Fire.— Boiling Water shall flow in upon their Heads:— The Fire shall burn what is in their Bellies, and shall roast their Skin.— They shall be beaten with Clubs of Iron. — When they think to go out of this Fire, they shall enter further into it.— They shall *not die* in those Torments, and their Torture shall never be asswaged.— They shall in vain implore Succour of God. — They shall demand of the Keeper of the Fire, Will thy Lord never deliver us from these Pains?— He shall answer them, Ye shall abide there eternally.— They shall never get out of this Fire,
 " neither

“ neither be able to repent. — Their Pains
 “ shall be augmented, and Pains upon
 “ Pains.”

It appears then, that this Doctrine of eternal Torments, is certainly a *Mahometan*, if not a *Heathen* Doctrine. But whether it be a *Jewish*, or a *Christian* Doctrine, remains a Subject of Inquiry.

I have not yet been able to discover any Thing like it, in the Writings of the *Old Testament*: And am fully convinced that *those Passages* in the New, which have been thought to imply it most strongly, do directly, and in the strongest Manner imply the contrary. — And for Proof of this, I beg leave to refer you to a Discourse, now going to be published.

If the Expressions of *being thrown into a Furnace of Fire — cast into a Lake of Fire — into everlasting Fire — into Hell, where the Worm dieth not, and the Fire is not quenched*; — do not import a total Destruction, or Annihilation; I must confess myself to be utterly at a Loss; and must beg your kind Assistance, in order to find out the Meaning of them.

If

If I tell a Man whose House is on Fire, That that Fire is *unquenchable*; the Meaning is the same, as if I told him, that his House would be entirely destroyed. If I tell a Gardener, whose Plants, or the Blossoms, are infected by the Worm, That he cannot kill that Worm, or, that *it will not die*; it is the same Thing as if I told him, that his Fruit will come to nothing, or his Plants die. Or, if a Patient is afflicted with a Distemper, which is supposed to proceed from Worms, and he is told that *the Worm will not die*; the meaning of the Phrase must be, that the Disease will end in the Death of the Patient. And if such Phrases be considered as proverbial among the Jews, and that when any Person fell into any Distemper, or Calamity, that would certainly end in Destruction, it was usual for them to say, "That is a Worm that will not die;" or, "That is a Fire that will not be quenched;" the Sense is perfectly intelligible: They meant that it was a lost Case; that there was no Possibility of preventing the Destruction of the Person, or Thing, to which they applied the Proverb.

Besides, there is something absurd and *contradictory* in the Image made use of, if we suppose Chaff, Wood, or other useless Materials, thrown into an unquenchable

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Fire,

Fire, and yet not to be consumed and destroyed in that Fire; or, a living Creature cast into it, and yet preserved alive for ever in it: For, throwing into the Fire is always understood, to be the most effectual Way to *destroy* a Thing: And the *less* *extinguishable* the Fire is, the *more* *certainly* will the Subject thrown in be *consumed*. And the original Term, *κατακαίειν*, properly translated, is, *To burn up*, or *utterly consume by Fire*: which is directly contrary to a Being preserved in the Fire. *Who shall burn up the Chaff with unquenchable Fire.* John iii. 12. The Expression here is probably borrowed from Malachi iv. 1. *For behold the Day cometh that shall burn as an Oven; and all the Proud, yea, and all that do wickedly shall be Stubble; and the Day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither Root nor Branch.*—Similar to this is the Expression in the Epistle to the Hebrews: *Our God is a CONSUMING Fire*, *καταναλισκων*: Which signifies, utterly destroying; the very reverse of preserving.—There is, indeed, so direct a Contradiction between the Idea of preserving any Creature alive, and that of throwing it into a Fire, a Fire that cannot be extinguished; that if duly considered, it is amazing how Men came to join so opposite Ideas together,

together, or imagine them to be consistent. This inconsistency *Mahomet* ridiculously attempts to reconcile by saying, "That God will change their burned Skin into a new Skin, that they may suffer the more."

Fire is, indeed, an Instrument of *Torture*, as well as of *Destruction*. But why Men should think it more becoming the most just and merciful Governor of the World, to make it an Instrument of *everlasting Torture* to his offending Creatures, rather than of their *everlasting Destruction*; or why, they should be disposed to take the Words of Scripture in a Sense contradictory to Reason, Justice and Humanity, when they will not only admit of, but are *most naturally* understood in a different Sense, agreeable to Justice and Clemency; is to me inconceivable.

The Subject is reducible, as far as the Christian Revelation is concerned, to this single Question: Whether the afore-mentioned Expressions are intended to convey to us the Idea of everlasting Torture, or of everlasting Destruction, *i. e.* Annihilation? — Perhaps, some may be inclined to think, that they serve to convey Ideas, both of Torture, and of total Destruction. With such

Persons (if there are any) I desire to have no Controversy. Because on this supposition, the Torment or Misery cannot be infinite. And it is only that Mahometan, Pagan, and (as I must confess it appears to me at present) most absurd, cruel, Anti-Christian, and diabolical Doctrine of *infinite*, or *never-ending* Misery and Torment, which I am opposing, and endeavouring to eradicate: "*Quam excutere opinionem* (to use the Words of Cicero) *mihimet volui radicitus.*"

That there are Passages in the New Testament which imply, that the Sentence of eternal Death shall be executed upon Criminals with Circumstances of Ignominy, Horror and Pain, *proportionate* to their Guilt, I readily allow and affirm: Yet am not of Opinion, that the Figures of being *cast into unquenchable Fire*, and the like, are intended to convey to us *any* Idea of *Torment*, but *solely* that of total *Destruction*, or Annihilation, or a ceasing to exist. And the Passage in the Book of Revelations, where it is said, that *Death and Hell* (i. e. *Hades*) *shall be cast into the Lake of Fire*, seems to me decisive in this Point. For certainly the meaning there is, not that *Death and Hades* shall be *tormented* (which is ridiculous) but that they shall be *abolished*.

But

But it is not my Design, either to Trouble you with a superfluous Repetition of what hath been suggested in the Discourse referred to, or to *exhaust* the Subject: But only to represent to you in few Words, the View which I have of it at present; and to intreat your friendly Assistance, in further explaining the Subject, and either rectifying, or confirming my Sentiments.

And give me leave to say, Sir, That it is a Subject worthy of your Pen: That according as the Doctrine of future Punishment is differently explained and believed, it will very differently affect Mens Opinion of the Supreme Being: And that in a Cause, in which the Honour of God, and the Credit of the Christian Revelation, are so immediately concerned, you cannot find yourself unconcerned.

For my own Part, I am persuaded, that the vulgar Notion of eternal Torments has been productive, not of Virtue and Happiness, but of Wickedness and Misery in the World, where it has been most seriously and steddily believed. However, Consequences are not the Subject of our Enquiry, but the Truth of the Doctrine. The proper Question is, What is the Doctrine of
our

our Saviour?—When that is determined ; if any Man, after allowing the Doctrine to be *His*, yet shall impute ill Effects to it, or assert that it ought not to be preached, or published ; he pretends to be wiser than our Saviour, and is guilty of an Arrogance inconsistent with his Christian Profession.

That you bear a more free and noble Mind than to be influenced by vulgar Prejudices, or infected with an Itch of Popularity, or biased by any mean Considerations ; I am most willing to believe. And therefore hope, that you will favour myself, and others, with a public Explanation of your Sentiments ; and, if you think proper to take Pen in Hand, cannot easily doubt of your doing ample Justice to so important and interesting a Subject.

I am, with sincere Esteem,

Yours, &c.



SAMUEL BOURN.

